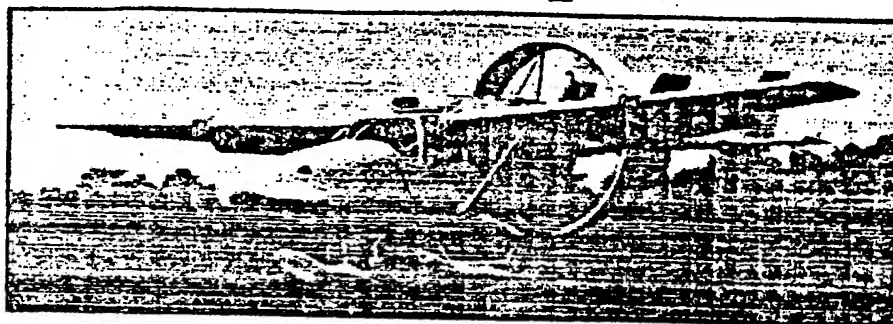


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Saudi Bucks, CIA Backing Give Birth To 'Pipeline Inspector'

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Only its mother could love the ungainly beast: a Cessna O-2 forward air control plane with its front engine removed and a massive shrouded propeller installed between its twin tailbooms, festooned with extra fins and stabilizers and sporting dune-buggy tires and skis. It was quite unknown until the Soloy Company displayed a photo of the machine in its booth at the Helicopter Association International meeting here last week.

Defense Week has learned that the odd-looking brute is no product of an eccentric private contractor. It has been developed using Saudi Arabian money under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency, with the full support of the U.S. Air Force. (The CIA responded to queries with "no comment;" the Air Force did not respond.) It is designed to do something that no other aircraft can do: lift off from a 500-foot stretch of soft, ankle-deep sand without churning the desert into a massive cloud and wrecking the engine. It is also extremely quiet in flight, thanks to its slow-turning, shrouded propeller. Silence and long endurance are its big advantages over the helicopter.

The modified O-2 has been developed by Brico, a company with no known background which appears to be headquartered in a Langley, Virginia mailbox. It was delivered by USAF transport to Soloy for modification, and made

its first flight about the middle of last year. The plane has been tested quietly from a Mississippi airfield, and has also been ferried to Saudi Arabia for tests in real desert. Apparently, these have been quite successful, and the type is due to be unveiled shortly as a civilian "pipeline inspection" aircraft.

It is very possible that pipeline inspection is not far from the truth, although the machine might be used for other clandestine purposes. Oil pipelines are hard to protect and vulnerable to commando or terrorist attack. This has been a serious DoD concern. Purring quietly above the desert, its observer viewing the scene with a simple forward-looking infrared (FLIR) scanner, the modified O-2 would leave no hiding place for a band of raiders. At night in the desert, men, animals and vehicles

shine like beacons on FLIR. The plane's little Allison turbine, with exhausts over the wing, would probably be a difficult target for heat-seeking missiles.

As for operational equipment, a close look at the new aircraft is revealing. The designers have taken away the front engine of the O-2. (The original aircraft has a unique "push-pull" layout with engines fore and aft.) Behind the plane's center of gravity, they have added a huge propeller, a big shroud or duct, and extra tailfins. All this means that there has to be something much heavier than a FLIR system in the nose if the aircraft is to fly. Something like a 7.62mm Minigun, for example. Offenders might face something worse than revocation of their camel licenses.